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CHAPTER TWELVE – TONY WALTER AND CLARE GITTINGS

What Will the Neighbours Say? Reactions to Field and Garden Burial¹

In modern Britain mourning has been largely a private affair. However, since the 1970s the proliferation of public spontaneous shrines and informal memorials challenge mourning's conventional boundaries, making it far more visible in public space. This chapter looks at the taken-for-granted phenomenon of burying the dead in the *public* space of churchyard or cemetery. As the data presented shows, however, very occasionally these take place in a garden or on some other entirely *private* plot of land. It explores reasons why this might not be acceptable – to other family members, to neighbours, subsequent owners of the land, presenting examples of disposal which nonetheless seem to indicate a re-ordering of place, boundaries, public and private.

In academia, the news media and the internet there has been considerable debate about shifting boundaries around death, the disposal of the body and sites of memorialisation of the body (Howarth 2000). What Santino (2006) calls spontaneous shrines, and Walter (2008) the new public mourning, may take various forms such as roadside shrines, memorials on mountain tops, floral tributes to dead celebrities, or the proliferation of ritual silences (Grider 2005). These informal shrines and memorials are hailed by some as bringing death and mourning out into the open, but denigrated by others as inauthentic look-at-me grief, 'grief lite', inappropriate reminders of mortality (O'Hear, 1998; West, 2004). One camp welcomes this celebration of human emotion and its challenge to a supposed death-denying society; the other camp asks not that death be denied, but that it be bounded, so that we can go about our everyday lives without *memento mori* confronting us on every street corner, park bench or mountain summit (Jones 2005; Mountaineering Council of Scotland

¹ We acknowledge helpful comments on an earlier draft by Jenny Hockey, Leonie Kellaher, and Malcolm Ramsay.

2008). The discomfort is caused by what had hitherto been bounded (in a cemetery, at a defined war memorial) or private (grief) leaching out into everyday public space. More than uncomfortable, it can be experienced as tasteless, even disgusting. The new public mourning thus comprises matter (memorials, emotions) that, for critics, is out of place (Douglas 1966, Petersson 2005). The debate has focussed on grief, which many feel should remain private, invading public arenas, and is similar to debates on the 'permissive' society: some welcome a less repressed approach to sex; others, while not disapproving of sexuality, consider it should remain within the boundary of the marital bedroom and not dominate the media, fashion and advertising.

Burial not in a public cemetery or churchyard, but in your own garden or on other private land, breaks conventional boundaries, not by making public what normally is private, but by making intensely private what normally is public. Burial on private land is extremely rare in the UK, but it is legal (Bradfield 1993) and of considerable theoretical interest. Does it disturb people because it fails to place the dead in a conventional death place, or is it acceptable because the grave is private, not in the public's face? What does burial on private land tell us about the shifting boundaries of contemporary death (Howarth 2000), its public and private faces (Mellor 1993)?

Ever since the Christianisation of Europe, it has been normal for Britain's dead to be buried in churchyards or other Christian burial grounds.² From the mid-nineteenth century, cemeteries have supplanted churchyards as the normal place of disposal, augmented in the twentieth by cremation. So are garden and field burials matter out of place (Douglas 1966)? Are they an example of highly charged heterotopia (Foucault 1984) - a term borrowed from medicine meaning the presence of a tumour in a place where one would not normally find (Petersson 2005: 73)? Is a body in your garden abject, an object of horror (Kristeva 1982)? Are unbounded dead bodies as disturbing as unbounded dying bodies (Lawton 1998)?

Or, are garden burials part of a culturally accepted romantic Rousseauian tradition? Jean-Jacques Rousseau was initially buried in 1778 (before removal in 1794 to the Panthéon) in a garden tomb on the isle of poplars in the garden at Ermenonville

² In the USA, the church never had a monopoly on burial. Family burial sites, common in settler days, are still in use in some remote areas even today (Sloane 1991: 14-17; Amy Whitehead: pers. comm.).

outside Paris. The garden was planned by Rousseau's patron Count Louis-René Girardin, who was inspired by Rousseau's philosophy of the nobility of nature, and is one of the first French gardens designed in the informal English style. Rousseau's island burial, connecting wild nature and grief, tapped into the heart of Romanticism and the new worship of nature (McManners 1981: 343-53). The idea of garden burial has earlier origins still in England (Draper 1967; Thomas 1983: 237-8), and we have documented a number of eighteenth century examples elsewhere (Gittings, 2007; Gittings and Walter 2010). In 1997, Diana, Princess of Wales, was buried in a lone grave on an island in the Spencer family estate at Althorp and, though many aspects of her funeral drew criticism, none was directed at her final Rousseauian resting place. Relatively few today may know of Rousseau's grave, but that Diana's drew no criticism indicates public acceptance of the concept of garden burial, or at least of the concept of garden burial surrounded by water and an extensive estate, protecting the dead from the living and vice versa.

Whether everyone is so accepting of a body in the suburban garden next door is another matter. We have found that private burial, though embraced by the person arranging it, can sometimes cause offence to others who become aware of its existence. Yet others are not at all offended. We explore the ambiguity of the buried body as potentially vulnerable, in need of protection; and as potentially dangerous to the living, who themselves need to be protected (Hertz 2004; van Gennep 1960). The incorporation of the buried body within nature or the home may feel 'right' to family members, a fitting place where the dead can rest in peace, yet the unmarked, unbounded grave may threaten others who need the dead to be kept in their place, marked off from everyday life. In this chapter, we explore how comfort and discomfort are produced. What makes a private burial site, to use Petersson's phrase (2005), a proper place of death? To address this question we drew on ideas relating to boundaries, and the tension between the vulnerable dead and the dangerous dead and ask is it the dead, or the living, that boundaries protect? Elsewhere (Gittings and Walter 2010), we explore the related issue of liminality and examine more closely the difference between bodies buried in the cultivated garden close to the house, and those buried on other, usually less cultivated, but still private land.

The study

In 2008, through contacts in the Natural Death Centre (internet A), we interviewed five people who had arranged private land burials in Britain in the preceding fifteen years. It turned out that they all had buried not in their own garden, but on a piece of marginal agricultural or otherwise uncultivated land, adjacent to their garden or at a distance, owned by themselves or by someone else. Three sites are in southern Scotland, one in northern England, one in southern England. The interviewees were middle or upper class with access to land, but with left/green politics; in age they ranged from their thirties to sixties; four buried spouses who had died in youth or middle age; three have published short articles about the funeral (Hale 2005; Johnston 2004; Speyer 2001). Here we quote extensively from one interviewee who highlighted a number of issues addressed by this chapter. In line with our earlier experience of interviewing people about funerals and memorials (Walter 1990), our interviewees asked us not to anonymise their dead; we consider that their wishes supersede paternalistic social science research ethics guidelines that require anonymity. Though anonymity may in most social science research be an admirable default position, in research into funeral and post-funeral practices we consider it unethical to anonymise those whom the living seek to memorialise, unless the living ask otherwise (Grinyer 2002).

Interviews were also conducted with a couple who live in a house which has two previous occupants buried in the garden (Croft 2007), and with a 'green' funeral director who told us about four home burials - these involved the burial of a son, an uncle, a grandfather, and a commune member; those of the son and uncle were in the small gardens of ex-council houses. In addition, there are a number of published accounts of garden burial, for example Speyer and Wienrich (2003: 95-103) and *The Telegraph* (2001).

Though burying bodies on private ground in the UK is rare, privately disposing of dry cremated remains is not (Prendergast et al 2006). Unlike in Germany and Scandinavia (Petersson 2004: 46), British families have the right to take ashes from the crematorium for private disposal. In increasing numbers, they bury or scatter them in

places of personal significance - burial may be in the garden, scattering is often in symbolic, liminal places such as beaches, mountains or football pitches (see Chapter 9). Below we cite some findings of a recent study (Prendergast et al 2006, Hockey et al 2007a,b) of private ash disposal which shed light on our themes of boundaries, protection and privacy. We now turn to the factors that seem to us to be associated with the production of a proper, or improper, place of burial, and consequent comfort or discomfort.

Boundaries

Thomas Hollis died in Dorset in 1774 and was buried, according to his biographer, in 'a grave ten feet deep' in a field 'immediately ploughed over that no trace of his burial-place should remain' (Blackburne 1780: 481). Two centuries later and four hundred miles north, Heather Johnston buried her uncle and mother in the field adjoining their cottage in the Scottish borders (Johnston 2004). She and her husband own the field, one on which a local farmer grazes sheep. Though she has planted a tree and placed an uncarved natural boulder at the head of her mother's grave, Heather has not fenced the graves or otherwise distinguished them from the rest of the field:

When I go and walk down the field I can see the trees growing, and when the earth sinks we fill it up with mole hills, and we look after it over the years. Try and make it back to pasture land, with sheep grazing over it. The farmer was a bit shocked about that, 'Oh, you'll be fencing it off?' 'No.' 'Isn't that a bit unseemly?' He was just under 50, and it was funny, because he was very modern, but he just thought this was a bit unseemly, so that was surprising.

There are five other cottages nearby. Even though the residents of four of them expressed no reservations about the burials, one had concerns, as Heather told us:

One of them was *really* disturbed, thought this was a *very* strange idea. 'Ooh, ooh, is this right? I'm not sure.' She didn't want to talk about it much, but I think what was on her mind was the idea of having a body so close. Whereas in fact, it was not close. You have to cross the wee road, and then walk, I don't know, a hundred yards or more, down the slope. It's not actually obvious at all. I think what was going on for her was it really made death more obvious,

and *that* disturbed her. She's somebody who pushes away things she doesn't like. Whereas for us, what I *liked* about it was that it made it more personal and connected and real; those were exactly the bits that disturbed her.

The farmer's feeling that a fence would be appropriate, and the neighbour's subjective sense of the nearness of graves that objectively were further away than a churchyard might be to a house, suggest their gut feeling that dead bodies need to have a boundary around them, protecting the living from the dead. Or perhaps they felt the bodies were insufficiently protected and respected. Either way, field burial appears to be more contentious than island burial. Douglas (1966) has argued that matter that crosses key symbolic boundaries may be deemed either sacred, or polluting. A grave that to Heather is 'personal and connected and real', a proper place for the dead, and acceptable to four of her neighbours, is for the fifth disturbing and unseemly.

Dead bodies can, in this respect, be like cars, children, parties and washing. I may take great pride in my car or my children, I need to hang out my washing to dry, and my parties are fun. But to neighbours, other people's cars and parties are polluting, their children a nuisance, and their washing an eyesore. This is especially likely when these bodies and objects are not controlled, not placed within proper bounds: when someone else's car is left outside my house, when their washing is hung on the wrong day, when I do not know what time their noisy party will end, and the shouts of their children invade my territory. I need to take care of and protect my car, my children, my husband's remains; others, though, may need to be protected from my car, my children, my husband's remains. They are all both vulnerable and potentially dangerous.

It is not just members of the public, but other members of the family who may prefer the grave to be marked, for example by traditional grave accessories. Heather continues:

On the anniversary of her death, or was it Mothers Day, my brother and his wife arrived at my house with one of those manufactured holders for flowers that you see at graves, with the holes for flowers, it says 'In memoriam' or something. Well they arrived with that, and with flowers to go in it... And for him obviously it formalised something really important. What has struck me

quite a lot since then is that what feels really *good* for some people in the family takes a bit of getting used to for others.

The same divergence is found in some woodland burial grounds where an agreement states that individual graves should not be marked, yet some families nevertheless mark theirs like conventional graves, with little white picket fences, plastic flowers, gnomes, and handwritten anniversary cards (see Chapter 10).

Pets and ashes

Though it is extremely rare in Britain for whole human bodies to lie undifferentiated from the natural and/or the human world, this is very common for human ashes and the bodies of pets, both of which may be buried in the back garden or unmarked in some other place. Arguably, ashes and pets are seen as less dangerous, because – in the case of ashes – they are dry and comparable to bones rather than a fleshy corpse, and – in the case of pets – they are already more part of the natural world.

Many British suburban gardens contain do-it-yourself pet burials, some marked, some unmarked. Though the number of commercial pet cemeteries is on the increase, pet burial in your own garden is not known for causing discomfort, to family or neighbours. Gardens are seen as a place for the natural cycle of growth and decay, which may be why the burial there of non-human species is uncontentious. Insects and mites in profusion also die and decay within the house, but their remains are dry and largely invisible, with discernable remains vacuumed up and removed. Dead mice and birds in the house, however, are out of place, and domestic cats who bring them in may be perceived as naughty.

Ashes are sometimes buried in the back garden. Hockey et al (2007a: 10-12) give an example. Carol interred her father's ashes under a birdbath in her daughter's quite small garden; her father liked to go and sit in this garden and Carol thought she herself might move house, so her father was more secure in her daughter's garden than her own. Carol 'had cared for her father on a daily basis while he lived in a flat opposite her marital home' (Hockey et al 2007b: 42) but considered her father's sudden death as bad – alone, not among family – so his final location restored his

place at the heart of the family. Though the ash grave is physically marked by the birdbath, visitors would not be aware of this unless told. Symbolically, in death as in life, there is no boundary between him and the family (Hockey et al. 2007b).

The scattering of human ashes to wind or water is of considerable theoretical significance. The mixing of ashes with the elements may be symbolically satisfying for mourners, but problematic for others. At the funeral of folk singer and hill walker Ewan McColl, his widow Peggy Seeger and their children performed one of his songs *The Joy of Living*. The first verse sings of the ‘the air like wine’ of the northern hills McColl so loved. Having bid farewell in verses two and three to his wife and children, McColl instructs them to take his ashes to ‘some high place’ and scatter them to the wind so that he may be part of the air they are breathing. This means the absence of any boundaries between McColl’s remains and the pure mountain air. Other may love the hills, but remain resistant to the idea of breathing mountain air polluted with bits of McColl, however much they enjoy his songs! But this is the symbolism of scattering ashes to the wind (even if in practice, scattered ashes fall to the ground within a few feet and then get mixed by the rain into a soggy heap). Symbolically, scattering returns us to nature, all boundaries dissolved. Scattering on the ocean has similar symbolism, and physically the ashes actually disperse in accord with the symbolism (Walter 1994: 174-5).

The symbolism of scattering to the wind is acceptable because, should any member of the public actually breathe a particle or two of scattered ash, they will not be aware of it. This contrasts with the less acceptable sight of both ashes on the ground and visible smoke from a crematoria chimney. Scattering ash on the wind or in water confirms an obvious, but important, point, that lack of a boundary between human remains and the living has the potential to disturb only if the living are aware of it. What disturbs people is the *perception* that there is no boundary.

Public and private statements

Though we wanted to know only about burials on private land, we could not stop three of our interviewees recounting at length and with pleasure all aspects of the funeral, which – as is common after the deaths of those in their fifties who are likely

to fully socially engaged – drew substantial numbers of mourners and were thus very public events. They contrasted markedly in two of these cases with the subsequent privacy of the unmarked grave, whose location would be known only to those who attended the funeral. Visitors to churchyards and cemeteries often read the inscriptions on graves with which they have no personal connection: such inscriptions are both intensely personal and manifestly public. By contrast, unmarked and uninscribed graves (whether or not on private land), like unmarked ash scatterings and private ash burial, are private. (Though in Scotland and in upland areas of England and Wales there is a legal right to roam, not all the field graves we examined in such areas would be recognisable as graves to the casual passer-by). If spontaneous shrines make public what previous generations had kept private, an unmarked grave in a field, like an ash scattering, renders private what is normally public. (Graves in gardens, possibly, may be less private. Gardens typically have more visitors than non-garden plots or fields, and a marked grave in a small garden would be highly visible).

Therefore, is it wise for those who bury on private land to tell the neighbours or other parties? Though this was not an issue for our five main interviewees, there is evidence in some other cases that this has caused trouble retrospectively, and prospectively some householders have worried who to tell that there are bodies in their garden. In the following cases, despite the grave being in a private place, other people experienced discomfort.

When Terry Lee made the mistake of telling the local authority he intended to bury his wife at the rear of their former council house in Dover, the neighbours were outraged, and their protest led the council to take out an injunction to stop him (Telegraph 2001).

Terry's mistake was to make visible what might, with considerable care, have remained invisible. What was essentially a private statement became public.

In 1996, Barbara Vessey buried her husband in an unmarked grave on the field adjoining their house in Wales, with no objections expressed (to her knowledge) by the local community. Some time later, she sold the land, and 'within weeks, a neighbour who had been frustrated at not knowing exactly what we had done, told the owners a fairy tale...' Not being able to identify the precise grave site, the new

owners obtained official permission to hire a mechanical digger to dig up a wide area in order to locate, exhume and cremate the body (Speyer and Wienrich 2003: 102-3). Gittings and Walter (2010) provide eighteenth century examples of exhumation following garden sales.

Heather Johnston – aware of possible future interest not only by subsequent owners but also by family members, genealogists, police, planners – was not entirely happy about the non-recording of field burials in Scotland, and would in principle support a national register. In the meantime, she intends to use GPS technology to prevent any future problems:

It is our intention to precisely note the grid reference location of the graves and place this information with the deeds of our house.... The land would be sold with a covenant that the graves should remain in perpetuity.

She and her family have also had discussions about fixing a marker on the tree indicating this is a grave and of whom. At the entrance to another field burial site, also in Scotland, the family have written a poem on a bronze plaque, saying ‘This is where we lived our lives, this is where we gladly died.’

There is also the question of whether to tell the children. If you buy a house with human remains buried in the garden, do you tell your children? Little Clarendon, dating from 1600, is a modest house with a modest garden in a Wiltshire village, restored in the early twentieth century by George and Mary Engleheart who lived there till their deaths in 1936 and 1948 respectively; Mary willed it to the National Trust. The garden is occupied by the deceased Mr and Mrs Engleheart, while the house is currently occupied by John and Aileen Croft and their children (Croft 2007). Aileen told us she did not at first mention the graves to her children, but when she did they had no problems with it. The youngest daughter (aged 6) was fascinated that two of those who lived there are buried there; she points out their gravestones to visitors on the days the property is open to the public. In this instance, time may also be a factor. The Englehearts’ remains are presented as history; they presumably have become safe dry bones, no longer in the liminal state of wetly decomposing flesh, more akin to ashes.

While some gardens become a place of burial, some burial grounds become gardens. Anderson (2009) reports on a house recently built within London's historic Highgate Cemetery; the cemetery is effectively the house's garden. In another English city, within half a mile of the home of one of the authors there are eight old (pre-1900) but now full burial grounds. Two have had private houses built on them. A question for the owners is, how public should they make their garden's necropolitan past? In each case, the house name gives a hint: Yorrick (referring to the grave digger in Hamlet) in the case of a former Unitarian burial ground, Eastergate (referring to the resurrection) in the case of a former pauper burial ground. The name does not directly announce the garden's original use, but might prompt a question to the owner about the reason for the name, in which case the previous use becomes known. When clearing the former pauper burial ground, the first owners, who were practising Catholics, wished to respect its dead. They came across many bones, which they placed in a structure resembling a well that they constructed for the purpose; they also commissioned a small statue of an orphan girl, which they placed under a bush near the house. Like the house's name, the meaning of neither well nor statue are immediately obvious to visitors, but may prompt questions that reveal their meaning. When after several years the house was sold, the new owner faced Aileen Croft's question: should she tell the children?

Of course, we might expect these ancient dead, presumably reduced long since to dry bones, to be seen as less dangerous than the recent, fleshy, decomposing dead. They are more akin to ashes. But these owners did worry over whether to tell the children. Though the Englehearts and the original owner of Eastergate were comfortable with the dead at the heart of their ancient garden, subsequent owners were not quite so sure. Feeling protective toward the dead now in their care, they also felt protective toward their living children. As Ariès (1962, 1981) has argued, sensitivities about the dead and about children, historically over recent centuries, have increased in tandem, though this does not mean there is today agreement as to how best to protect children (Pilcher 1995: 48-57)

Unmarked graves are uncontentious if not known about by other parties, but can become extremely contentious if their presence is discovered, as we saw with the bulldozing of the Welsh field. Whereas with spontaneous shrines, the concern is that

reminders of death can turn up anywhere, with the unmarked but hard to locate grave, it is the dead themselves that could be anywhere (see Chapter 5). And that disturbs those who, not unreasonably, wish death (perhaps along with sex, madness and other challenges to personal control) safely bounded; and it worries parents who wish to protect their children from such dangers.

Conclusion

The creation of boundaries around some of life's more physical aspects – eating, defecation, sex, death and decay – has been extensively analysed and theorised (Douglas 1966, Elias 1978, Giddens 1991). In the UK, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for example, human remains have been progressively moved away from human habitation to cemeteries and crematoria on the outskirts of town, thus distancing them from the world of the living (see Chapters 8 and 10). Death has been sequestered (Mellor 1993), though arguably some of these boundaries are currently dissolving (Howarth 2000). Mellor and Shilling (1993) have argued that in modernity death is absent in public but very present in private. This has been challenged by Walter (1994) who points to the highly visible presence of death in the media, in medicine and in public statistics; the problem being more that these representations of death are typically dissonant with private experiences of loss. For Petersson (2005), spontaneous shrines in public places can cause discomfort precisely because they bring the abject into the open.

In this article we have used the distinctly unusual phenomenon in Britain of field and garden burial to explore these issues further, and our findings align well with the general argument of Douglas (1966) about boundary breaking, and Petersson's (2005) specific argument about spontaneous shrines. The lack of boundaries implicit in private burial can induce either comfort or discomfort, a sense of almost sacred fittingness or a significant sense of unease. The potentially most disturbing human remains or other *memento mori* are those that are not only unbounded, but also make a public statement and are highly visible. The current proliferation of spontaneous shrines and informal memorials are good examples. Unbounded graves or memorials cause no trouble, so long as they remain private statements, invisible to strangers. We

also conclude that what matters is not so much whether the remains, or other memorial, are in a public *place* as whether they make a public *statement*. Privately scattering ashes on a popular mountain summit is no problem, but can become so if lots of other people do it and lots of others know.

Our analysis has benefited from the fundamental insight of van Gennep ([1909] 1960) and Hertz ([1907] 1960) that the dead can be both *dangerous* to the living; and *vulnerable*, in need of protection from the living. Typically, the recent dead are both more dangerous and more vulnerable than the ancient dead. As far as the dangerous dead are concerned, what is lost in burial in the back garden is a boundary between death space and domestic space, a boundary which can contain the threatening dead. Having them in domestic space is rather close for comfort, which may be why those we interviewed chose not to bury in their garden, but in a field. Decomposition in the garden threatens all the kinds of civilizing processes that Elias (1978) and Ariès (1981) discuss. The dead need to be bounded and they need to be kept apart from everyday domesticity, or at least that is the normal convention that home buriers are breaking. It is not surprising if the neighbours are disturbed. Field burial locates the dead away from domestic space; but unmarked and unbounded, for some neighbours, this too can seem threatening.

The recent dead are also vulnerable. For some, burial on private land offers the dead protection from a wider public, keeps them close to home or within nature. They may feel the dead are protected better there than in a cemetery. The ashes of the vulnerable dead are often buried in gardens, and Hockey et al's (2007a) interviewees were very clear that the remains needed protection not provided by the neglected, anonymous cemetery. But others may feel it is precisely the cemetery that protects the dead. Maybe the neighbour who thought the unfenced field burial was 'unseemly' and the relative who brought the flower holder felt that the corpse was insufficiently protected and respected. The hybrid nature of human remains as both threatening and vulnerable makes field and garden burial potentially divisive, and helps explain why individual feelings on the matter differ widely.

Our analysis may shed some light on the rapidly growing popularity and sympathetic media coverage of the now over two hundred natural burial sites that have developed

in Britain since 1993 (see Chapter 10; Clayden and Dixon 2007). Natural burial often entails interment in a grave with only minimal marking in a wood or field, sometimes destined to become a wood, replete with romantic Rousseauian nature symbolism adapted to an English love of deciduous trees and small woods (Schama 1995). But though each of the graves are very unlikely to have any kind of boundary akin to a cemetery's kerb sets, and are therefore symbolically part of nature, the natural burial ground itself – like Rousseau's and Diana's islands – is typically marked out, as a death place, via signage at the entrance. The public is thus protected from offense by inadvertently wandering among dead bodies 'that could be anywhere'.

The historical and contemporary links between the garden and the cemetery have been well documented (Francis et al 2005); we know that Western cemetery design from Père Lachaise onwards has been influenced by garden design and by romantic concepts of nature (Curl 1993). In this chapter, we have looked at those rare cases, not when a public burial ground resembles a garden or nature, but when nature or a garden actually becomes a site of private burial, and when a public burial ground, bones and all, becomes a private garden. We hope our guided tour of a few of these unusual gardens and fields has illuminated wider issues about boundaries; the historically evolving relation in Britain between the dead, the home, the garden, and nature; and the ambiguous status of the buried body as both vulnerable and threatening.

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